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# Transing: Resistance to Eugenic Ideology in Nella Larsen's *Passing*

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*Nella Larsen's Passing can be seen as a critique of early-twentieth-century eugenic ideology. Race, class, gender, and sexual binaries were mutually constituted in eugenic ideology and practices of the period and, therefore, cannot be separated or hierarchically ranked in any analysis of the character Clare Kendry. Clare challenges these identity binaries by attempting to not simply cross over them, but to live on both sides of them. The both/and nature of her actions and desires makes Clare a trans-figure, one who passes over, across, within and between categories, thereby defying and critiquing the eugenic ideological notion that identity categories are discrete, natural, and fixed.*

**Keywords:** Nella Larsen / *Passing* / eugenics / trans- / Harlem Renaissance

Originally published in 1929, Nella Larsen's *Passing* is a slim novel focused on the phenomenon of race and racial passing in the context of 1920s urban bourgeois life. The plot unfolds around the adult reunion of two light-skinned black women who are former childhood acquaintances: solid, predictable Irene, the "race woman" who passes occasionally for white, and beautiful, impetuous Clare, the supposed "race traitor" who regularly lives as a white woman. The book is narrated through the perspective of Irene, but is particularly fixated on Clare. Through the representation of Clare, who defies not only the black/white racial binary, but also class, gender and sexual binaries, *Passing* critiques the eugenic ideology of the period popular among the black bourgeoisie and intelligentsia. By representing Clare as a character who can move between identity categories, *Passing* challenges the eugenic notion that race, class, gender, and sexuality are natural and knowable categories which can be controlled for eugenic purposes. The action referred to by the novel's title, therefore, should

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not be read as a singular act moving toward a dominant identity, but rather as a form of *transing*: an active movement “that takes place within, as well as across or between” race, gender, sexuality, and class lines (Stryker, Currah, and Moore 13).

Much has been written about the novel since it was first released. Early on, most contemporaneous reviews addressed *Passing*'s representation of upper-middle class black people, while later criticism often focused on the novel's depiction of the trope of the tragic mulatto/a. (Larsen 85–103; Tate 142). More recent criticism has shifted to interrogate the novel through others lenses, such as gender, sexuality, and class. However, many scholars focus on one of these issues without taking into full consideration the influence of the others, attempting to make one area the single, most important, determining lens for analyzing the novel.<sup>1</sup> As Corinne E. Blackmer argues, “exclusive focus on one category of difference tends to inhibit analysis of how overlapping differences operate in syncopation” (232). For example, in “Black Female Sexuality in *Passing*,” Deborah McDowell criticizes previous literary scholars who do not recognize the existence of same-sex desire in the text. McDowell insists that the “dangerous” sexual subplot of the novel, exhibited by Irene's attraction to Clare and the envelope as a metaphoric vagina, is the *real* point of the novel and the racial passing merely a safe cover-plot (374–77). Jordan Landry makes a similar argument in “Seeing Black Women Anew through Lesbian Desire in Nella Larsen's *Passing*,” except Landry additionally insists that Irene and Clare's same-sex desire is an instance of black racial pride, a critical move that prioritizes the black side of the racial divide over the white side, upon which both women live — Irene occasionally and Clare more regularly/permanently (26–28). Even when multiple aspects of *Passing* are analyzed together, as in Jennifer Devere Brody's “Clare Kendry's ‘True’ Colors: Race and Class Conflict in Nella Larsen's *Passing*,” various identity categories are mentioned at the beginning of the piece, but not kept collectively central throughout the analysis.

The difficulty in sustaining critical engagement with the multiplicity of identity categories at play in *Passing* is symptomatic of a larger scholarly failure to connect discussions of the Harlem Renaissance and the coterminous intellectual movements of modernism and eugenics. In her article “Selecting the Harlem Renaissance,” Daylanne English claims that major black literary critics problematically present the Harlem Renaissance as an optimistic arts and culture movement of social change and racial uplift<sup>2</sup> that ultimately failed. These critics, English argues, give too much credence to self-proclaimed intellectual leaders of the Harlem Renaissance, such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke, and overlook the less positive artistic productions of the period, including Larsen's *Passing* (“Selecting” 814). English insists that scholarly emphasis on the optimism of the Harlem Renaissance allows the movement's artists and artistic productions to be treated as distinct from other aesthetic and intellectual concerns of the time (“Selecting” 813–14). English proposes a new genealogy of the movement that begins not with the return of black male soldiers from World War I, but with the issues and concerns of black women, many of whom were less optimistic about

the racial uplift ideology of the Harlem Renaissance (“Selecting” 815). In her more recent book, *Unnatural Selections: Eugenics in American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, English challenges “the still-common segregation of modern African American intellectuals from the dominant literary, philosophical and scientific debates of the modern period” (22).<sup>3</sup> The book connects the Harlem Renaissance to its larger social context by tracing the influence of modernism and eugenic ideology on several of the movement’s writers, including W.E.B. Du Bois, Angelina Weld Grimké, and Nella Larsen; however, English does not include a discussion of *Passing*.

Building upon the foundations of English’s arguments, I will take into account early-twentieth-century eugenic theories, values, and practices (which I will refer to collectively as “eugenic ideology”) in order to analyze the representation of Clare Kendry. This contextualized analysis positions Larsen’s novel as a text not of racial uplift but of resistance to discrete eugenic identity binaries. In what follows, I emphasize the interconnected nature of certain identity positions, specifically race, class, gender, and sexuality within American eugenic ideology. I argue that these categories were mutually constituted and defined within eugenics discourse and therefore cannot then be separated or hierarchically ranked in any analysis of Clare, despite their varyingly explicit appearances within the text. I do not claim to have found new “evidence” as such within the novel; indeed, most of the textual examples I point out have already been noted by previous scholarship. Instead, I suggest that using the historical context of eugenics allows us to review the old evidence in a new light, bringing a different perspective to bear on the novel’s most fascinating character. Through Clare Kendry’s transing of identity binaries and her characterization as an all-knowing, yet unknowable body, *Passing* can be understood as a critique of early-twentieth-century eugenic ideology.

## EARLY-TWENTIETH-CENTURY EUGENIC IDEOLOGY AND BLACK AMERICANS

In *Unnatural Selections*, English illustrates the variability of eugenic ideology in the period, showing how this ideology was taken up by blacks and whites, conservatives and liberals, both in theory and in practice. While twenty-first century individuals may tend to think of eugenics in terms of Nazi Germany, eugenics historically had much wider meanings, strategies, and practices. In the United States and Europe, eugenic ideology influenced the practice of institutionalization and incarceration, voluntary and involuntary sterilization, birth control, sex education, and marriage counseling.<sup>4</sup> Though it seems difficult to believe in light of eugenics’ widespread negative connotations following World War II, these projects were positively viewed and in some form practiced by “many, if not most, European and American citizens” in the early to mid-twentieth century (Davis 8). Interest in eugenics in the United States arose in the late-nineteenth century due to the belief that white, middle-class men had lost their virility from mental strain in corporate settings, while the virility of black, working class and/or immigrant

men seemed unchanged, if not enhanced (Kline 9). This alleged loss of virility among white men became even more problematic in light of early feminist and suffragist movements that seemed to indicate increased desire for power among women as more females entered the public sphere for work or education (Kline 10). It was believed that white, middle-class women “were becoming masculine just as [white middle-class] men were becoming increasingly weak and effeminate” (Kline 11). The so-called increased masculinity of women was blamed for decreased birth rates. Thus began the “race suicide” discourse, a term first coined by sociologist Edward Ross and later popularized by Teddy Roosevelt in his assertion that in order to achieve greatness, a race needed both “good fighters” and “good breeders” (Kline 11).

Although reference to “the race” in much eugenic discourse does not make clear whether race refers to human beings generally or Anglo-Saxons specifically, actual American eugenic practices indicate that poor, non-white, mentally or physically disabled, and sexually deviant individuals were not part of the mainstream development plan (Kline 5).<sup>5</sup> This does not mean, however, that eugenic ideology was not taken up by black middle-class intellectuals for the improvement of *their* race (English, *Unnatural Selections* 23). In fact, many black, mostly male intellectuals participated in passionate debates in periodicals and at professional organization meetings about breeding and birth control among black populations (Hart 75–78). While many mainstream, early-twentieth-century eugenic practices were targeted at white women (who were perceived as threats to “the race” as the physical carriers of children who would most influence offspring with their “good” or “bad” blood lines), black bourgeois professional and intellectual populations were similarly concerned with how to ensure the birth and rearing of eugenically-sound black children by upper and middle-class, straight, black women (Kline 59, 91).

Wendy Kline insists that by making claims about proper reproductive bodies, eugenicists over-valued uniformity and stigmatized difference (90). Difference here went beyond the largest markers of race, class, sexuality, and physical appearance/ability to also include the more indistinct categories of proper moral and social conduct—what is commonly referred to within black communities as a politics of respectability (White). As the United States approached the mid-twentieth century and the Harlem Renaissance reached its peak, the concept of “normal” behaviors and appearances for different gender, race, class and sexual groups became a central standard of American society among both black and white Americans (Kline 105).

In *Unnatural Selections*, English discusses the role of black women writers of anti-lynching dramas who, she claims, were those most vocal in resisting eugenic thought and rejecting the role of breeder in intraracial uplift ideology (122–23). Nella Larsen is briefly referenced as one of these black female protestors of eugenic ideology within black bourgeois uplift discourse, specifically due to a scene in her 1928 novel *Quicksand* in which Helga Crane refuses to give to the cause of black uplift after James Vayle’s insistence that she bear children to help improve the

race.<sup>6</sup> George Hutchinson, in his biography of Larsen, also notes this particular scene as a direct commentary on racial uplift, the concept of which Larsen considered “condescending and moralistic” (166). Though Hutchinson does not make the connection explicit, he writes about Larsen’s experiences as a nurse both in Tuskegee, Alabama just twenty years before the infamous Tuskegee experiments,<sup>7</sup> and in New York under the Bureau of Preventable Disease (7, 103). In these positions, Larsen would have been exposed to a number of eugenic theories and practices, including Better Baby Week<sup>8</sup>—a eugenic enterprise to reduce infant mortality and prevent racial degeneracy—and publications targeted at black populations that insisted that “Black doctors should call for a return to country living and to eugenic mating” (Hutchinson 103–04). This exposure to eugenic ideology and practices among black medical professionals in Larsen’s early career as a nurse would have set the stage for her critique of eugenic ideology both blatantly in *Quicksand* and more obliquely in *Passing*.

This brief overview of eugenics in the early 1900s illustrates the interconnected nature of identity factors such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and (dis)ability<sup>9</sup> within eugenic ideology and the relationships black intellectuals, professionals, and artists such as Nella Larsen had to eugenic practices. Kline and other historians of eugenics, as well as contemporary queer theorists who interrogate discourses of normality,<sup>10</sup> have shown that the concept of the norm does not exclusively or primarily rely on any single category. Instead, when referencing a single identity issue, such as race, one is also implicitly relying on other discourses within the normal/abnormal symbolic framework. While not all texts which reference or challenge the normal/abnormal divide are explicitly about all of these issues, they are nonetheless engaging with the larger discourse of normativity. It is easy to think one can analyze the roles of *just* gender or *just* race in a text, but to do so assumes that these categories exist in a vacuum unrelated to other aspects of identity, power, privilege, and oppression in either their social construction or lived/embodied experience.<sup>11</sup> By acknowledging the influence of eugenic ideology on black intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance and by recognizing the mutually constitutive nature of race, gender, sexuality, and class within this discourse, it is possible to read *Passing* as a critique of eugenic ideology through the character of Clare Kendry, whose *transing* of race, class, gender, and sexuality binaries defies the boundaries of identity categories throughout the novel.<sup>12</sup>

## TRANSING: CLARE AS A CHALLENGE TO EUGENIC IDEOLOGY

Through the character of Clare, her body and her actions, *Passing* deals with the binaries of race (black/white), gender (woman/man), sexuality (heterosexual/homosexual),<sup>13</sup> and class (working class/middle-class) in more and less explicit ways that sometimes overlap in terms of textual evidence, reflecting the interconnected and mutually constitutive nature of these binaries within eugenic ideology of the period. At various points in the novel, Clare deeply challenges the solidity of identity binaries—not by a simple, unidirectional passing from one to another

as is often posited, but rather by her desire for both/and, to live on or have consistent access to both sides at once. Clare attempts (to paraphrase Irene), to eat her piece of cake and nibble at others' pieces too (Larsen 35).

In their introduction to a special issue of *Women's Studies Quarterly* entitled "Trans-," Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore write that the hyphen in *trans-* marks an "explicit relationality . . . which remains open-ended and resists premature foreclosure by attachment to any single suffix . . . [The concept of trans-] explores categorical crossings, leakages, and slips of all sorts" (11–12). *Trans-* here is not exclusively tied to notions of gender, but is additionally connected to other manifestations of that prefix, including transnational, trans-racial, transition, transmit, transform, transgress, and so on. All of these terms indicate the types of movement and multiplicity Clare enacts throughout the text, which challenge the stability and singular nature of identity categories and boundaries within eugenic ideology. This relationship to the open-ended nature of the hyphenated prefix is why I consider Clare a *trans-figure* (Stryker, Currah and Moore 13), one who actively moves among and within multiple marked social spaces and activities, in this case those marked by race, class, gender, and/or sexuality.

It is Clare's multiple passings, her transing, that position her as an illegible being to, yet an expert reader of Irene and other characters. Her refusal to metaphorically "stay put" gives her "some quality, an intangible something, too vague to define, too remote to seize" (Larsen 12) in the minds of those who do not move so fluidly across and among identity boundaries. Such fluidity grants her insight into others at the same time. This reading of Clare is in opposition to those who understand her as a pure or partial victim of the greater social system. For example, Cheryl Wall ultimately reads Clare as "the victim caught forever betwixt and between until she finds in death the only freedom she can know" (109); she refers to Clare's transing as her "false role[s]" (107). My reading of Clare allows for agency in living "betwixt and between" identity positions. I therefore resist the idea that one side of any identity binary is actually true for Clare while the other is somehow false. Rather, Clare exhibits a creative and nuanced identity freedom that others in the text cannot experience: transing. As Stryker, Currah, and Moore note, however, "[t]ransing can function as a disciplinary tool when the stigma associated with the lack or loss of gender [or other identity] status threatens social unintelligibility, coercive normalization, or even bodily extermination. It can also function as an escape vector, line of flight, or pathway toward liberation" (13; emphasis added). In Clare's case, the potential for escape, liberation, or sustained freedom is ultimately unrealized as she dies in her attempt to live as a both/and trans-figure. In the end, she cannot be fully acknowledged within the wider either/or world of the novel. Yet this tragic end also operates as a critique of eugenic ideology that seeks to fix people into identity positions.

There is ample evidence for the active, multi-directional movement of Clare's transing. The most obvious and well-discussed of the identity binaries that she traverses in the text is race. After her father's death, Clare moves from her black

neighborhood to live with her white aunts, eventually running away and passing as white in order to marry John Bellew (Larsen 18–19). Her movement into the “white world,” however, is not permanent. Through her chance meeting with Irene Redfield, Clare begins to return to life among black people with frequent, though unpredictable, visits to Irene’s home and attendance at black bourgeois parties, teas, and balls. Clare does not align herself strictly or primarily with any racial group. While she passes as white in her marriage, she goes back and forth to Harlem without hesitation, as she often did initially after her father’s death, occasionally leaving her white aunts’ home to visit her old friends. This transing of the color line, which Irene reads as lack of racial consciousness or pride (44), is the basis of what I call Clare’s *both/and desire*: her refusal to stay on one side of any binary and her attempt instead to exist on both sides at once. Clare’s rejection of steady or consistent identification is the reason she becomes an unreadable character whose body and actions are often confusing or illegible—though fascinating—to other characters. As Irene notes, Clare “remained someone apart, a little mysterious and strange, someone to wonder about and to admire and to pity” (58).

A similar both/and desire exists in Clare’s relationship to class. Clare grew up in a working-class family; her father was their building’s janitor and she performed errands for a local dressmaker for extra money (5–6). In adulthood, Clare expresses to Irene her childhood envy of all that Irene and others in the old neighborhood had (19). After her father’s death, Clare remained part of the working class, living with her aunts who believed “hard labour [sic]” was good for her since she had “Negro blood” (18–19). With her marriage to Bellew, a banker, Clare passes over the class line, achieving material comfort and luxury, travelling internationally, wearing beautiful clothing, and sending her daughter Margery to boarding school. At the same time, Clare seems to care little about middle-class status once she achieves it. During her visits to Irene’s home, when Irene and/or Irene’s husband Brian are unavailable to spend time with her, Clare is willing to visit familiarly with Irene’s servants or play with the children instead (57). Furthermore, Clare voices no qualms about potentially being mistaken as a prostitute<sup>14</sup> if she attends one of Irene’s charity functions alone, finding the possibility “amusing” (50–51).

In these moments, Clare also expresses a both/and desire in regards to class, wanting to have the material goods and freedom associated with middle-class status while simultaneously wanting to associate with “average,” working-class black folk whose talk and laughter she claims to miss (50). Her desire conflicts with eugenic ideology that strictly separates social groups in order to prevent dysgenic reproduction. Further, Clare’s cross-class behaviors particularly confound Irene, whose middle-class alliances are quite consistent and clear. Again, this demonstrates how Clare’s transing prevents her from being understood by other characters.

Another area where Clare exhibits both/and desire is in her sexuality. As Deborah McDowell first pointed out, Clare exhibits same sex desire for Irene, writing her passionate letters, flirting with her, and once placing a kiss on her

bare shoulder (McDowell 371; Larsen 74). At the same time, Clare maintains her heterosexual status as the wife of John Bellew, and her continued heterosexuality is gestured toward through her flirting with other men, such as the waiter on the roof of the Drayton (12) and Dave Freeman (66). Eventually, this extends to Irene's suspicion of Clare's potential relationship with Brian (62). Clare appears to be quite indiscriminate about those to whom she gives her flirtatious attention and affection. While there are no explicit sexual acts in the novel—as McDowell notes, at the time, black women's writings about anything remotely connected to sexuality were rare (366)—attraction and desire are nonetheless palpable. Here, it becomes necessary to emphasize the *desire* of both/and desire. Though Clare does not explicitly cross the binary by having sex with a woman, she does dance on the boundary in her public actions and attitudes. This appearance of transing hetero- and homosexuality is just as important for Clare's characterization as her more direct transing of race and class because it raises other characters' suspicions and prevents them from reading her body and actions in the same way she seems to be able to read theirs.

Finally, Clare challenges constructions of gender normativity—not nearly as directly as the identity categories above, but in subtle, indirect ways that reflect her both/and desires. Clare is repeatedly noted as being extremely feminine and beautiful, with statements such as: “Clare Kendry's loveliness was absolute, beyond challenge” (Larsen 21). On the surface, Clare performs aesthetic femininity almost perfectly; however, her actions reject social standards of proper womanhood in a variety of ways. First, Clare travels the city alone, not caring if she is seen arriving at events unescorted (9) or accompanied by men who are not her husband (57). This appearance of promiscuity—also evident in her above-mentioned lack of concern about being mistaken for a prostitute—is the opposite of the dispassionate, chaste ideal connected to the cult of true womanhood (Welter).

Additionally, Clare seems to have little regard for her role as mother/breeder—a role clearly essential to proper womanhood within eugenic ideology. Although Clare does claim that if it weren't for her daughter she would have already left Bellew, the girl never appears in the text and seems to be of little real concern to Clare. At one point, she says to Irene: “Children aren't everything” (Larsen 58). Furthermore, despite her husband's wealth and ability to support more children, Clare insists on having no more, supposedly because she fears that the child would be too dark (26). Although Clare doesn't want to be male or pass as a man, she also does not want to conform to the expectations of traditional womanhood. In particular, she has no interest in the role of breeder for black racial uplift, since she is knowingly participating in miscegenation with her white husband. Clare wants to be admired for her feminine beauty and flirtatious personality, while simultaneously desiring the freedom from moral standards and breeder status—a freedom given only to men.

Together, these interconnected identity positions—race, class, sexuality, and gender—and Clare's challenging of their implicit binaries combine to create her characterization as “peculiar” (29), “unfathomable” (33), “queer” (28), “undecided

and uncertain" (58). Since race, class, sexuality, and gender are tied together within eugenic ideology, Clare's constant transing of these central binaries and her rejection of their stable social divisions make her impossible to understand for the people around her who—consciously or not—cling to the personal and social stability, consistency, and safety provided by adherence to identity binaries. Clare's disinterest in safety or a stable identity is incomprehensible to other characters, especially Irene "for whom safety, security, were all-important," and who feels a sense of "impending disaster" when Clare angrily rejects the idea of her passing being "not safe" (47). It is safe, bourgeois Irene, more than any other character, who is unable to read trans- figure Clare throughout the text. Irene thinks: "about [Clare] was some quality, an intangible something, too vague to define, too remote to seize . . ." (12), and later, Clare "seemed wrapped in some impenetrable reflection" (75).

Perhaps the best illustration of Irene's inability to read Clare comes when she meets Clare's husband for the first time. After listening to him spout racist ideas in the presence of three fair-skinned women with black heritage,

Irene Redfield was trying to understand the look on Clare's face as she had said good-bye. Partly mocking, it had seemed, and partly menacing. And something else for which she could find no name . . . puzzling again over that look on Clare's incredibly beautiful face. She couldn't, however, come to any conclusion about its meaning, try as she might. It was unfathomable, utterly beyond any experience or comprehension of hers. (33)

Note the emphasis on Clare's face as a metonym for Clare's larger intentions and desires. While Irene is primarily positioned as a reader of Clare's expression in this moment, she is also attempting to understand its meaning in the context of the person as a whole—something which she is ultimately unable to do.

Clare's illegibility relates directly to her transing of identity binaries which allows her to behave in unexpected ways that both baffle and intrigue other characters. Yet the seemingly illegible Clare is also positioned as a person with an incredible ability to read and understand others: "Clare Kendry had always seemed to know what other people were thinking" (75). Clare's status as an expert reader is established early by her recognition of Irene on the hotel roof and her exact memory of Irene's home address in Chicago (22). During the first conversation between them, Irene is already aware of Clare's abilities as an expert reader when, while attempting to excuse herself, she thinks, Clare is "almost too good-looking," to which Clare responds with an invitation to dinner and knowing smile, "as if she had been in the secret of the other's thoughts" (16). In the same conversation, Irene becomes annoyed that Clare detects her reason for discomfort after a regretted invitation to Idlewild, and then later that Clare seems "aware of [Irene's] desire and her hesitation" about asking about racial passing (17–18). This early establishment of Clare as expert, almost mystically knowing reader continues throughout the novel, with Irene noting the uncanny "way Clare could divine what one was thinking" (25–26).

Clare seems able to move among, respond to, and read other characters in an intimate and expert way, while she herself remains unintelligible. This seems connected to Clare's position as a trans- figure. While it is naïve to argue that transing automatically grants superior knowledge of the areas among which the trans- figure moves, in the context of the novel, it does seem that Clare's frequent and fluid transing is enabled by her expert and intimate knowledge of the groups among whom she visits and resides, knowledge she utilizes to shape her behaviors so as to not raise questions about whether or not she belongs. While Clare certainly draws attention to herself throughout the novel, it is not initially in a negative way. Rather, people are captivated by her beauty and her mystery, which are perhaps enhanced by her distance from them—her movements away as well as towards them. This knowledge of various groups, and Clare's ability to use it, is further apparent in the way Irene often believes Clare is not being genuine—that she is “acting, not consciously perhaps—that is, not too consciously—but, none the less, acting” (36). Clare's transing thus requires a performance of particular identities which further positions her as a figure who defies the stability of such identities altogether.

As noted at the beginning of my analysis, the trans- figure position is not without a price. Clare's transing has a power in the text that is ultimately thwarted. First, by her characterization as selfish, irrational, and child-like and, second, by her unexpected death from falling out of a sixth-story window—a death which cannot be conclusively termed accident, murder, or suicide. But Clare remains illegible even in death. Her dying only seems a falling into the trap/trope of the tragic mulatto/a who must die to satisfy the racial message of the text. The life that Clare was attempting to live—her both/and desire for transing race, class, sexuality, and gender binaries—was untenable in her world's either/or eugenic ideology so utterly dependent on those binaries for understanding and practice. Clare attempted to eschew the either/or of eugenic ideology for both/and, breaking the philosophical linchpin<sup>15</sup> of oppressive systems, and with deadly consequences. Within a realist novel such as *Passing*, there is nowhere for Clare to go, no way for her to continue transing. She cannot exist on both sides of multiple identity binaries without the text slipping into a utopian or magical realist form. While it is difficult to fully valorize Clare for her individualistic worldview, it is also impossible to condemn her for transing the oppressive either/or binary system in such a complex and intimate fashion.

## CONCLUSION

In Nella Larsen's *Passing*, the body and actions of Clare Kendry resist the identity binaries mutually constituted by eugenic ideology of the period. While eugenics are not as directly referenced in the text as they are in Larsen's earlier novel *Quick-sand*, an underlying resistance to the stable divisions inherent to eugenic practices is clear through Clare Kendry's transing of multiple identity binaries. This transing breaks the rules of eugenic practices through miscegenation, same-sex

desire, cross-class affiliations, potential adultery, and rejection of motherhood. By reading Clare through the lens of eugenic ideology and the notion of transing, I have not prioritized one particular identity marker over another, though I have acknowledged that some aspects, such as race, are more prominent in the text than others. I argue that it is the totality of Clare's transing multiple binaries that allows her simultaneous characterization as unintelligible being and expert reader. This characterization creates the alluring, mysterious, and dangerous ethos that surrounds Clare because of her seeming resistance to all categories. While other critics have focused on one, two, or occasionally three identity positions, typically discussing them as mutually exclusive, I have analyzed the way the novel takes up multiple identity categories that rely on each other for definition in the context of the eugenic ideology of the period. This approach attempts to better account for the complex nature of Clare's transing, which ultimately results in her death.

Again, while Larsen may not have written explicitly about the eugenic practices she would have witnessed herself as a public health nurse, her novel challenges one of its primary tenets: that there are clear and distinct differences between human beings who can be categorized into types. These differences have differential social value and can and must be determined to separate the dysgenic populations from the eugenic ones. Through the trans- figure of Clare Kendry, these fundamental assumptions of eugenic ideology are temporarily thwarted as she moves between and across supposedly fixed, discrete social, moral, and identity binaries. If eugenic practitioners were unable to tell black from white, middle-class from working-class, man from woman, homosexual from heterosexual, moral from immoral, then they would be incapable of encouraging breeding among the "right" individuals or preventing it among the "wrong" ones. Clare Kendry's characterization as illegible being and expert reader who has no concern for safety or stability makes her dangerous, despite her beauty. In fact, her beauty makes her more dangerous, or perhaps her danger makes her all the more beautiful. Either way, Clare's transing pushes too hard on the foundations of social stability for the period and her both/and desires ultimately cannot be sustained by the realist text. Despite this, however, readers are still left with the resonating image of a captivatingly beautiful, alluringly dangerous being who defied identity binaries by trying to have — and be — it all.

## Notes

1. For additional examples of primarily single-axis approaches, see Goldsmith as well as Blackmore.
2. For more on racial uplift and the Harlem Renaissance, see Gaines as well as Gates.
3. English addresses the relationship of eugenics to American literary movements. For a discussion of eugenics and British and Irish literature, see Childs.
4. See Davis and Freeman 66; Davis 8–10; Goodwin 231; Kline 142–43.
5. See also Carter 7.

6. See English, *Unnatural Selections* 1, 122–23, 32–34; See also Hart 166.
7. The Tuskegee experiments occurred between 1932 and 1972 in Tuskegee, Alabama. In these experiments poor, rural black men, who believed they were receiving free healthcare, were used by public health officials to observe the effects and progression of untreated syphilis. Although the men were not infected by the health officials as some popular renditions of the experiment claim, they were never told they had the disease nor were they given treatment for it.
8. For more on Better Baby Week, see Holt. She discusses the Better Babies Movement, which later evolved into the Fitter Families campaign, references to which can be found in several other histories of eugenics. See also Stern.
9. I use “(dis)ability” here to designate a wider term that includes ability and disability. Unlike terms such as race and gender, which inherently include white *and* black, female *and* male, there is no English word for ability and disability collectively.
10. For example, see Lochrie.
11. Other scholars, such as Robin D.G. Kelly, Siobhan B. Somerville and Anne Fausto-Sterling, have made similar arguments about the mutually constitutive nature of particular identity categories.
12. I regret that (dis)ability must be left out of this discussion of *Passing*. While it would perhaps be possible to argue that in the final scene, after falling out the window, Clare does temporarily—though probably not willfully—threaten to cross the boundary from nondisabled to disabled, as illustrated by Irene’s nauseated reaction to the thought of Clare’s “glorious” mutilated body after the fall. This potential passing over the able/disabled binary would likely be permanent rather than a move back and forth, a both/and, and ultimately it does not come to pass as Clare is killed instantly on the pavement. I do find this brief, apparently nauseating, threat of disability in the text interesting, but there is not sufficient evidence that I can currently find in the novel to substantiate including (dis)ability as a primary category of analysis in this article despite the centrality of (dis)ability in eugenic ideology. For more on the relationship of (dis)ability to eugenic treatments of other social categories, see Baynton.
13. I use this binary as it likely would have been understood at the time. I do not mean to foreclose the possibility of bisexual or queer identities, but recognition of such identities/terminologies did not explicitly exist at the time.
14. This portion of the text alludes to the frequent associations of black female migrants in Northern cities with prostitution, sexual degeneracy, and social danger as discussed by Hazel Carby in “Policing the Black Women’s Body in an Urban Context.”
15. I borrow this phrase from Patricia Hill Collins who writes that “[e]ither/or dualistic thinking . . . may be a philosophical lynchpin [sic] in systems of race, class and gender oppression” (20).

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